

# The City University of New York and the Shaughnessy Legacy: Today's Scholars Talk Back

Judith Summerfield, Peter Gray, Cheryl C. Smith,  
Crystal Benedicks, Mark McBeth, Linda Hirsch,  
Mary Soliday, and Jessica Yood

*ABSTRACT:* To commemorate the 30th anniversary of the publication of Mina Shaughnessy's groundbreaking book, *Errors and Expectations*, a roundtable discussion was held at the March 2007 Conference on College Composition and Communication in New York City. This article, based on the earlier discussion, examines the question of CUNY's multiple identities within the legacy of Shaughnessy, who coined the term "basic writing" and founded the *Journal of Basic Writing* in 1975. Composition theory and practice owe much to Shaughnessy's work at CUNY's City College in the 1970s against the backdrop of the University's experiment with Open Admissions. Although much has changed since then, CUNY is still associated with that rich historical moment, and with the questions Shaughnessy and others at the time confronted. These questions, which grapple with the very nature of literacy and democracy, need to be reframed for our times. Contributors to this article include scholars from a number of CUNY's 17 undergraduate colleges, each of whom begins with a quotation selected to focus attention on an issue of relevance today.

*KEYWORDS:* Open Admissions; access politics; Mina Shaughnessy; City University of New York; literacy; democracy and education; basic writing; ESL

## Judith Summerfield

*"We classify at our peril. . . . It is our intention in the present research to describe stages in the development of writing abilities . . . a way of classifying that is both systematic and illuminating in the light it sheds upon the writing process itself."*

—James Britton et al., *The Development of Writing Abilities* (1-3)

I want to talk about the contexts in which Mina Shaughnessy was writing, the company she was keeping in her reading and in the people she

---

**Judith Summerfield**, currently University Dean for Undergraduate Education at CUNY's Central Administration, is Professor of English at Queens College, CUNY. Her work in composition and rhetoric includes *Texts and Contexts: A Contribution to the Theory and Practice of Teaching Composition*, with the late Geoffrey Summerfield, and a winner of the MLA Mina Shaughnessy award. She oversees a number of University-wide initiatives to improve undergraduate education, including *Writing Across the Curriculum*.

© *Journal of Basic Writing*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2007

was talking to in the 1970s, when she was doing her seminal research at City College. As a younger faculty in the mid-1970s, I knew of Shaughnessy, of course, but lived professionally in another of CUNY's senior colleges across the East River in the borough of Queens. (New York has five boroughs: Shaughnessy was teaching and doing her research in Manhattan.)

The times, as we know, were tumultuous: the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, the War on Poverty, Vietnam, desegregation, Black Panthers, Black English, an intense interest in language and in the teaching of English, both in the States and in Britain. I want to talk about the confluence of those two worlds. In 1966, the Dartmouth Seminar was convened, a collaboration of NCTE and its British equivalent, NATE, and co-sponsored by the MLA. At this seminar, thirty-nine American, British, and Canadian scholars and teachers debated for two months over various perspectives on the teaching of English in an increasingly test-driven culture. They were especially concerned with how to put culture, language, and thought—and the individual learner—at the center of the debates.

Two conferences followed: the first held in York, England, in 1971, and the second in Sydney, Australia, in 1981. These two meetings were to take the work of Dartmouth further. A set of commissions grappled with critical questions of teaching English across the globe: teaching writing, literature, reading, and speaking; assessment; developing literacies across the curriculum for an increasingly diverse student body; and exploring the kinds of research needed for the work of K-16.

Shaughnessy attended the 1971 York conference. I know this from one of the participants, my late husband, Geoffrey Summerfield, a professor at the University of York and one of the conference organizers. *The Development of Writing Abilities*, based on the study conducted by James Britton and his team, was published in 1975. Shaughnessy may have seen a draft of the book, I don't know, but I suspect that her work on classifying "error" was connected to the London Schools Council research on classifying student writing, with their explicit aim of changing the expectations of students' writing abilities, and therefore changing the ways English was being taught in the schools. That group of scholars and teachers wanted to make room for creativity, drama, and poetry, so that students would be able to write, as James Moffett put it, "a universe of discourse."

What's important here is to understand that these were then, as they are now, big questions about teaching English as a social, political, democratic act, and they need to be at the center of current debates about how to teach English in this increasingly global world.

Britton's work, cited above, was a major project funded by a progressive government: the task was to demonstrate that the kinds of teaching and testing prevalent in the British schools narrowed expectations of what students can do and learn to do. There was an intense interest in language, in language play, in the imagination, and in exploring language-use in various contexts. Limit the curriculum, and you limit students' growth as users of language, as producers of knowledge. Shaughnessy's bibliography in *Errors and Expectations* lists two more works of Britton and his group as well as a host of other works that this community of international scholars was reading in common, creating an increasingly shared body of knowledge and research. They were defining, as Shaughnessy said, the "territory of language" (10). We were reading across the disciplines, across traditional academic boundaries, from learning theory to structural grammar, anthropology to second-language learning, socio-linguistics, Russian formalism, literary criticism, and, of course, literary texts.

In 1970, CUNY's Open Admissions experiment began. In that year, 35,000 freshmen were admitted to CUNY, seven times the number of first-year students allotted the year before. Shaughnessy, an English instructor at the City College of New York (a CUNY senior college) who had been director of the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) Program for financially disadvantaged Black and Puerto Rican students, was named Director of the Writing Program. CUNY became the laboratory for one of the most daring experiments in the history of higher education, and Shaughnessy, a leader in recharting the territory in the teaching of writing. Her research, supported by the Carnegie Foundation, received national attention and still engenders intense debate. To read Shaughnessy's work as solely about error analysis is to miss the larger political significance: As Janet Emig put it, Shaughnessy's "commitment [is] to the infinite possibility of the individual" (qtd. in Maher 129).

But by the time *Errors and Expectations* was published in 1977, the "pure phase of the experiment," as Lavin and Hyllegard put it, had passed (20). In 1976, the New York City fiscal crisis precipitated profound changes within the University—faculty were dismissed; programs such as the basic writing program at City College dismantled. In a 1976 address to the Conference of the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors (CAWS) that she calls the "The Miserable Truth," Shaughnessy speaks of the University "shak[ing] and fractur[ing] under the blows of retrenchment." These are "discouraging times for all of us," she says (qtd. in Maher, 264). Shaughnessy and a group of fellow compositionists were asked to participate in a Writing Task Force

to create the first CUNY-wide Writing Assessment Test (WAT).

It took, however, another twenty years for Open Admissions to be officially ended at CUNY's senior colleges.<sup>1</sup> The WAT exam was replaced by a nationally normed "CUNY/ACT Writing Sample" test. And at the same time, resources were provided to a new University-wide Writing Across the Curriculum program, mandated by CUNY's Board of Trustees. The CUNY scholars represented in this article are all taking part in what has become a vital transformative project about teaching writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—and paying tribute today to our rich legacies.

In England, the London Schools Council project initiated a Writing Across the Curriculum program in 1977, but the times changed, and the work devolved into a competency-based school regime, which lasts to this day. I understand, though, that *some* Brits are now rediscovering Britton and his work. I'm certain there's a panel going on somewhere on the importance of the Britton legacy, with today's scholars "talking back."

These are not small issues, and as we look back, we remember that the stakes were and are still high for ourselves, our students, and the culture.

### Works Cited

- Britton, James, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* (A report from the Schools Council Project on Written Language of 11-18 Year Olds.) London: Macmillan, 1975.
- Lavin, David, and David Hyllegard. *Changing the Odds: Open Admissions and the Life Chances of the Disadvantaged*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1996.
- Maher, Jane. *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997.
- Moffett, James. *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton-Cook, 1987.
- Shaughnessy, Mina P. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

1. **Editors' Note:** On May 26, 1998 (and again on January 25, 1999, after a legal challenge to the first vote), CUNY's Board of Trustees voted to phase out all "remediation" in its four-year colleges by January 2001. In practice, this meant that only students who passed all three of the University's assessment tests (reading, writing, and math) upon entrance could be admitted to a bachelor's degree program in one of the four-year colleges. Others would have to begin their studies in an associate's degree program or in one of the University's community colleges.

Mina P. Shaughnessy

**Peter Gray**

*“When we say our students’ writing is literature, we are asked, How do you define literature? Here the definition is simple. What we pay attention to is literature.”*

—Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen, *Beat Not the Poor Desk* (70)

Where Shaughnessy focused on errors of language use and challenging teachers to understand newly their notions of “error,” across the Queensborough Bridge and the East River, and down the Long Island Expressway to Queens College, Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen were busy working, to put it bluntly, to undo the damage of Shaughnessy’s focus on error and usage. In their widely regarded (at the time, but now largely forgotten) book, *Beat Not the Poor Desk*, Ponsot and Deen created a program of teaching that is a direct challenge to, and an indirect critique of, the entire project Shaughnessy creates in *Errors and Expectations*.

*Beat Not the Poor Desk* is based on two broad ideas that constitute this critique and that sets out their own aims. First, as they write in their preface, they want, rather simply, to have teachers teach and writers write, beginning with student writing that is not drills based. Second, Ponsot and Deen exhort teachers to make use of their literary studies training: “Because we know what literature is, we ought to be able to set up an elementary writing course on elemental literary principles. . . . We don’t have to starve ourselves of literature just because we are teaching inexperienced writers. We can use all we know to teach them. But *not* directly” (8). Ponsot and Deen wanted novice writers to work with “shapes found in literature of the oral tradition, for these shapes have by their spontaneous recurrence and long survival... proven that they are congenial to the human mind. It is a natural, central starting place” (Ponsot 33). Suggested shapes include “[f]ables, riddles, sermons, curses, epitaphs, prayers, anecdotes, proverbs, spells and charms, laws, invective—all are quintessential structures” (Ponsot and Deen 5). This pedagogy invited teachers to abstract their own structures from literature and to “present these structures in seed sentences for writers to imagine in their own versions” (Ponsot and Deen 4). This made sense for a good many who were teaching in the SEEK program with them at Queens College; it was a

---

**Peter Gray** is Associate Professor of English at Queensborough Community College, CUNY, where he co-directs the Writing Across the Curriculum Program. His current work includes participation in a CUNY-wide Carnegie CASTL project and a pilot graduate interdisciplinary pedagogy seminar.

program that offered full employment for many poets, novelists, playwrights who, with Ponsot and Deen, cultivated the ideas that grew into *Beat Not*.

Ponsot and Deen, however, shared with Shaughnessy an advocacy for students that was grounded in commitments to open access to higher education, and they, like their colleague at City College, believed in the “promise that to learn skill is to take on power proper to us” (Preface). Ponsot and Deen emphasize over and over again the importance of respecting students and of taking their writing seriously; doing so demonstrates their “deepest conviction”: “that we are not different from our students in any important way” (10).

Read through today's eyes, *Beat Not* is a vision of the process movement as literary formalist poetics. The book rejects Shaughnessy's attention to understanding error newly as a method to teach writing because doing so circumscribes the writers' imaginations with what they call in their preface “teachers' [already formed] analytic conclusions.” In a recent interview, Ponsot explains her alternative method, one that is foundational to *Beat Not*: teachers should give “people things to do that you would be willing to read as literature. [Student] papers will have a literary structure because you will not have asked for well-punctuated sentences or grammatically varied sentences, what a dreadful thing to tell students to do, awful. They will be good, readable, literary sentences because you will have said, ‘Write me something brilliant, write me something elegant’” (Ivry 54).

Placing Ponsot and Deen next to Shaughnessy is to see a very early version of later debates English Studies began to wrestle with in earnest throughout the 1990s: Can we usefully negotiate rhetoric and poetics at the site of literacy instruction? Can a formalist poetics, or any poetics for that matter, be reconciled with liberatory, social politics and pedagogies that extend the legacies of colleagues working during the Open Admission years at CUNY and elsewhere across the country and that we have begun to articulate variously for first-year writing programs? How might we reinvigorate the “literary” as an object *and* a means of study?

### Works Cited

- Ponsot, Marie, and Rosemary Deen. *Beat Not the Poor Desk: Writing: What to Teach, How to Teach It and Why*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1982.
- Ponsot, Marie. “Total Immersion.” *Journal of Basic Writing* 1.2 (1976):31-43.
- Ivry, Benjamin. “Marie Ponsot Interview.” *BOMB* No. 83 (Spring 2003): 50-55.

**Cheryl C. Smith**

*“We have been trained to notice what students learn, not how they learn it, to observe what they do to writing, not what writing does to them.”*

—Mina Shaughnessy, “Open Admissions  
and the Disadvantaged Teacher” (403)

Shaughnessy wrote these words in 1973, three years after Open Admissions had begun at CUNY’s City College. *Errors and Expectations*, published seven years after the start of Open Admissions, documents how quickly the new policy had impacted CUNY’s undergraduates and their relationships to language. During this tumultuous time, Shaughnessy witnessed and responded to changes in her classes, institution, and roles as teacher and administrator. More than three decades later, I see Shaughnessy’s words as strikingly relevant to my work at CUNY. I arrived at Baruch College in September 2003, only two years after the end of remediation had gone into effect, requiring applicants for baccalaureate programs to meet minimum levels on standardized tests in math and English. Six years into this new admissions policy, we find ourselves in another tumultuous time, not entirely unlike that of Shaughnessy. Shifts in students’ academic backgrounds and goals, along with adjustments to entrance requirements, have put some undergraduates into precariously marginalized spaces, admitted to college but not prepared, and possibly not permitted, to take certain core courses. How do faculty respond to the needs of an institution in flux and work with the students wedged into gaps created by significant adjustments in admissions protocol? Are we going to dismiss them as incapable or try to understand their patterns of error and the impact of our expectations?

Amidst all the turmoil of policy change, what makes this quotation from Shaughnessy most relevant to me now is its call to be more aware of the processes of students’ learning—*how* they learn—and the effects of our teaching—what it *does* to them. Shaughnessy urges us to step back from the tumult and remember one of the basics of teaching and learning: to ap-

---

**Cheryl C. Smith** is assistant professor of English and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) faculty coordinator at Baruch College. Her scholarly interests are writing program administration, curricular change and pedagogical innovation, cross-disciplinary faculty development, and early American women’s political writing. Her recent work has appeared in *the Journal of American Culture*, *Reclaiming the Public University: Conversations on General and Liberal Education*, and a forthcoming article in *Teaching North American Environmental Literature*.



proach our students with respectful curiosity about what they hear in our assignments, our comments, our grades and standards. When we know how they internalize the language of the academy, we can tailor our practices and respond to their writing in ways that take into account their experiences and perspectives on academic work.

In reminding us of the importance of considering student experiences and perspectives, Shaughnessy taps into notions central to the current movement around the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL)—yet another testament to how strikingly ahead of her time she was. When Ernest Boyer published *Scholarship Reconsidered* in 1990, pushing the academy to make teaching as important as research in faculty priorities and promotion, he effectively launched the SoTL movement that has gained momentum in recent years. Shaughnessy anticipates this movement by nearly two decades. To remind us to be more aware of how students learn and what writing does to them is to foreground three main needs: first, to analyze our students' learning continually, and in new ways; second, to be as critical of our teaching as we are of their learning; and third, to keep up with changes in our students and the world when it comes to language, reading, and writing. These needs reflect SoTL's mission and Shaughnessy accomplishes all three in *Errors and Expectations* when she examines patterns of student error to advance an argument not only about student literacy but also faculty expectations, and how both play out in our nation's changing classrooms.

To honor Shaughnessy's legacy thirty years after the publication of her groundbreaking book, we should follow her lead and examine our classroom practices, their processes and effects. In the title of the essay from which the above quotation comes, "Open Admissions and the Disadvantaged Teacher," she subverts the idea of disadvantage in our schools. It is less important that Open Admissions introduced new kinds of under-prepared students to college than that the teachers themselves were newly under-prepared and therefore disadvantaged. Shaughnessy repeatedly foregrounds faculty "deficiencies" and "maladies" to argue that we writing teachers need remediation ourselves, to be put on our own "development scale" as she puts it in "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing" (234). It is a message that faculty may not want to hear—and understandably so. Professional remediation to analyze and correct our deficiencies? We feel crunched enough by heavy teaching loads and needy students. How can we be expected to put more time into that single aspect of our workload when so many other tasks clamor for our attention? Even Shaughnessy concedes that the decision to dive in to our own remediation process as teachers "demands professional courage"

(“Diving” 238), suggesting that teaching can be at odds with other faculty concerns, especially research, and may in turn put those who emphasize teaching at odds with their colleagues, departments, and institutions.

But today at CUNY and across the nation, students are changing, and our teaching has to keep up with the changes. Faculty have to manifest professional courage and institutions have to support it, or our students will not reach their full potential. For instance, the work of helping current undergraduates comprehend and engage demanding reading materials continues to get more and more complicated by the increasing diversity of students’ languages and the nature of their exposure to reading. Professors—who want to ensure that students receive the “correct” reading of a text—may focus, as Shaughnessy argues, on what students learn over how they learn it. In our teaching practice, we can be tenacious in looking for the what: the content knowledge. We ask ourselves again and again, did students get the assigned reading? Did they understand the study’s results, the novel’s plot, the article’s point? Then, as our students fail to demonstrate such knowledge, we fail to see our own disadvantaged way of framing their understanding in the first place. In not accounting for the complex processes of learning, we miss opportunities to optimize it by, for example, fostering deeper student-led discussion, assigning more in-class writing, or regularly using group work as a means to help students comprehend difficult course materials. Such techniques enable teachers to create the student-centered classrooms that more flexibly adapt to undergraduate experiences and perspectives. Sometimes we need a dose of pedagogical remediation to remind ourselves of the alternative roads to learning.

Since the end of remediation in CUNY’s four-year, or senior, colleges, it has become more and more important to remain aware of these alternative roads to learning. Shortly after the end of remediation, increasingly competitive admissions standards began to be put in place, having effects we can not afford to ignore on the classroom level. One effect concerns the relationship between the two- and four-year colleges. If the higher standards draw better-prepared students to the senior colleges, a larger number of less-prepared students will be directed to the system’s community colleges, which need to have programs and staff in place to handle the changes. Furthermore, these same students may well come to one of the senior colleges within a few short semesters. Transfer students comprise more than half of Baruch’s graduating class each year, a statistic true for many of CUNY’s baccalaureate-granting institutions. The undergraduate experience in the twenty-first century—especially in a large, diverse commuter system like

CUNY—has become remarkably fluid. As a result, we can no longer look at what we do to engage students and improve their performance in isolation, on our individual campuses; we have to talk to our colleagues throughout the system to understand their work and challenges. Once we do, we can improve articulation between our programs and ease the transition of the many undergraduates who transfer between schools every year. Meanwhile, in some cases students still get provisionally admitted to a senior college without meeting minimum basic skills requirements in English. Since the end of remediation, however, such students have dwindling options. They most often get relegated to non-credit courses that prepare them to take and retake the system's standardized writing and reading tests, which they desperately need to pass in order to fully enroll in an undergraduate course of studies. For them, the tests are less a learning experience than a hurdle—a dreaded and often demoralizing bridge to the first-year composition class that brings them into their college writing experience with a sense of failure rather than potential. At my school, SAT scores and other indicators tell us that new students' preparedness and pre-college academic performance are improving overall; nevertheless, CUNY continues to serve an economically and linguistically diverse city population that brings an exciting yet complicated mix of educational experiences, languages, fluencies, and literacy levels into the system's classrooms.

Because we encounter such a complex set of undergraduate experiences and needs in the twenty-first century school, it is especially incumbent upon us to regularly take stock of who is there, how they are doing, and what we are doing. In my view, this involves approaching teaching as a scholarly activity where meaningful gains in our pedagogy are always to be had and can be achieved in two main ways. First, we should be opening up our classrooms and their practices to more ongoing conversation that leads to experimentation and innovation. A crucial step toward realizing such innovation is building communities of practice both in and across the disciplines, as well as across campuses, where faculty talk to one another about teaching and learning. Equally crucial is building time into faculty workloads for participation in these communities. Second, we should be actively fostering greater awareness about how our students are changing, along with acceptance of and accommodation to how they are changing our institutions and some of the most important work that we do. It is not enough, for example, to celebrate CUNY's rising standards as improving the value and competitiveness of the University's degrees, or to bemoan those standards for denying access to under-represented groups and reneging

on the University's historical mission. These opposing views, so familiar in the years surrounding Open Admissions and then again at the end of remediation, have resurfaced in recent months as we grapple with the issue of raising competency levels in math (Arenson; Posamentier). Do more stringent requirements for admission to CUNY's top-tier schools motivate the most capable students to perform at a higher level and reward them with a more competitive degree, or do such requirements block deserving yet less-prepared students from an opportunity to prove themselves at the college of their choice? CUNY's longstanding commitment to providing fair and equitable access to a quality public higher education should inspire us to keep these critical debates open—but we also have to pay attention to how the debates shake out, semester to semester, in our classrooms. Shaughnessy's work reminds us that our careful attention to classroom dynamics, along with the subsequent changes to how and what we teach, can have the most immediate impact on the standards and missions we defend so passionately.

### Works Cited

- Arenson, Karen. "CUNY Raising Admissions Standards with Higher Math Cutoff." *New York Times* 28 July 2007: B1.
- Boyer, Ernest L. *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990.
- Posamentier, Alfred. "Standards Aid CUNY Students." *New York Post* 20 Aug. 2007: 27.
- Shaughnessy, Mina P. "Open Admissions and the Disadvantaged Teacher." *College Composition and Communication* 24.5 (1973): 401-04.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 27.3 (1976): 234-39.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

## Crystal Benedicks

*"Just how we are finally going to reconcile the entitlements and capacities of these new students with our traditional ways of doing things in higher education is still not clear. As we move closer to this goal, however, we will be improving the quality of college education for all students and moving deeper into the realizations of a democracy."*

—Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (293-94)

This quotation—about the challenge of reconciling the entitlements and capacities of open access students with our traditional ways of doing things—takes me to one of the most traditional of our ways of doing things in the academy: doctoral education. Here I speak as a recent doctoral graduate with a specialty in Victorian poetry, and also as a newly hired faculty member teaching composition at an open-access community college. I believe many professors in English or even other fields are in the same position: the traditional way of doing things (research for the Ph.D.) doesn't match up with the non-traditional spaces (the composition classroom) in which we find ourselves.

Cheryl Smith has connected Shaughnessy's work with the scholarship of teaching and learning. I want to pick up there, and extend the idea to future college teachers who are, literally, still students.

There is a strong but unexplored relationship between the attitudes that Shaughnessy tells us drive meaningful teaching and the scholarly attitudes emphasized in traditional doctoral education. Shaughnessy advocates close readings of student texts: doctoral students spend their time analyzing literary or theoretical texts. Shaughnessy questions established administrative and curricular structures: doctoral students study literary structures as well as the structural logic of period divisions and canon formations. Shaughnessy reminds us of the importance of considering the social, political, and economic contexts that shape our understanding of higher education and who it is for: doctoral students draw attention to similar contexts for their objects of study.

And the dissertation itself—that most wrenching of writing assign-

---

*At the time of the CCCC presentation, **Crystal Benedicks** was serving as Assistant Professor of English at CUNY's Queensborough Community College. She is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana. She received her doctorate in 2005 from the CUNY Graduate Center.*

ments—is ripe ground for considering questions of audience, of what is lost or gained in taking up the language of authority, of the uneven process that is writing, of the ways in which available grammatical and organizational structures shape the ideas we have to express. All of these are questions that beginning writing students face, and that we ought to talk about in classes both doctoral and remedial.

We must find ways to make the links between studying to become a professor and teaching writing explicit, for traditional doctoral education in English does not prepare teachers to teach basic, or even introductory, writing. I am fortunate to have attended the City University of New York Graduate Center, where graduate students routinely teach composition and basic writing at one of CUNY's undergraduate colleges from their first day of graduate school. Even so, many new members of the professoriate—myself included—go through what Patrick Bizzaro has called “an identity crisis,” schooled in literary analysis but teaching writing to beginning students. For Shaughnessy, the challenge of reconciling the traditional conception of the academy with the reality of educating all students is worthwhile because on it rests the ideal of democracy itself: that all students ought to have access. This only works if the scholarship of teaching writing is taken seriously by the doctoral curriculum that prepares the teachers who educate within the democracy.

### Works Cited

- Bizzaro, Patrick. “What I Learned in Grad School, or Literary Training and the Theorizing of Composition.” *College Composition and Communication* 50.4. (1999): 722-42.
- Shaughnessy, Mina P. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

**Mark McBeth**

*"This is not an interesting memo—but it's important. In fact, if you don't read it, some part of the fragile machinery that moves us . . . will probably break down."*

—Mina Shaughnessy, Memorandum, December 17, 1971

Richard Miller in *As If Learning Mattered* contends that the work of the compositionist does not begin in the classroom but in its preliminary construction. He writes:

[T]hose truly committed to increasing access to all the academy has to offer must assume a more central role in the bureaucratic management of the academy. . . . it is at the microbureaucratic level of local praxis that one can begin to exercise a material influence not only on how students are represented or on which books will be a part of the required reading lists but also, and much more important, on which individuals are given a chance to become students and on whether the academy can be made to function as a responsive, hospitable environment for all who work within its confines. (46)

Miller underscores the importance of programmatic structures and how compositionists must understand them if those "responsive, hospitable environment[s]" are in reality to materialize into successful instructional endeavors. Miller deems certain educational leaders as "intellectual-bureaucrats," and his description aptly portrays Shaughnessy.

Marilyn Maiz, Shaughnessy's assistant, told me in a personal interview that for Shaughnessy "administration wasn't the thing she was vitally interested in but she felt it was very important. . . . For Mina, it was just a very human thing. It wasn't like administration was separate from these other things [teaching, scholarship, classrooms]. It was just all part of the package" (Personal Interview). In "Intellectual Wasteland," Richard Miller suggests

---

**Mark McBeth** teaches as an Associate Professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, where he is also Deputy Chair for Writing Programs and Writing Across the Curriculum Coordinator. His scholarly interests intersect the history of education, curricular design, and writing program administration as well as sociolinguistics.

that “[b]y learning to look at the business of writing instruction from the administrator’s view, it is possible that, in addition to finding ways both to rewrite the history of the discipline and to redefine the focus of classroom research, we might just uncover ways to materially change the working conditions of those who teach writing” (25). The ways in which Shaughnessy’s administrative and pedagogical work informed her scholarship of the basic writers of early Open Admissions should redefine how we approach the bureaucratic work that compositionists must inevitably perform.

Shaughnessy’s historical legacy as a Writing Program Administrator (WPA) demonstrates that one need not be solely the paper-pushing Bartleby the Compositionist, but that, in fact, the knowledge, ingenuity, and charm that one brings to administrative tasks complement our teacherly work and may substantiate our scholarly endeavors as well. In other words, the oft-tedious bureaucratic labors we will inevitably face may not deter us from the publish-or-perish work we need to complete, but, on the contrary, may lead us to it. Applying our scholarly scrutiny and creativity to the administrative positions we hold may prove to make the WPA’s labors both more fruitful and possibly more rewarding (perhaps even pleasurable).

### Works Cited

- Maiz, Marilyn. Personal Interview. 12 February 2004.
- Miller, Richard E. *As If Learning Mattered: Reforming Higher Education*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “From Intellectual Wasteland to Resource-Rich Colony: Capitalizing on the Role of Writing Instruction in Higher Education,” *Writing Program Administration* 24.3 (2001): 25-40.
- Shaughnessy, Mina. “Memorandum to Instructors (December 17, 1971).” Archives and Special Collections, Morris Raphael Cohen Library, The City College, City University of New York.



**Linda Hirsch**

*“College both beckons and threatens them, offering to teach them useful ways of thinking and talking about the world, promising even to improve the quality of their lives, but threatening at the same time to take from them their distinctive ways of interpreting the world, to assimilate them into the culture of academia without acknowledging their experiences as outsiders.”*

—Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (292)

Written thirty years ago, Shaughnessy's words reminded her readers that the “culture of academia” was both enticing and threatening to the students she named “basic writers,” requiring them to reconcile the rival claims of their non-school literacies such as dialects and first languages, and academic literacy, the language of the classroom (Courage). Today, against a backdrop of a greater diversity of English-language users and a 118% increase in the number of homes speaking a language other than English during the period from 1979 to 1999, CUNY and in particular its community colleges confront the challenge of enabling students to value and draw on their own cultural resources and non-school literacies as they develop the academic literacies required for success in the university and beyond.

From the early 1970s, when Open Admissions allowed many second-language learners to enter the University, ESL writing pedagogy has moved from an emphasis on error correction and contrastive analysis through process writing to today's discourse analysis. In *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy described the tension between content and form, a tension still with us today:

While we must dismiss as irresponsibly romantic the view that error is not important at all . . . we should also be wary of any view that results in setting tasks for beginning writers that few besides English teachers would consider important. . . . This emphasis upon propriety . . . has narrowed and debased the teaching of writing, encouraging at least two tendencies in teachers—a tendency to view the work of their students microscopically, with an eye for forms

---

**Linda Hirsch** is Professor of English at Hostos Community College/CUNY. She has published on the use of writing and speaking throughout the disciplines for English-language learners and is currently the Coordinator of the Writing/Reading Across the Curriculum Initiative at Hostos.

but with little interest in what was being said, and a tendency to develop a repugnance for error that has made erring students feel like pariahs. . . . (119-20)

Since Shaughnessy's time, issues of identity, multiple literacies, and technology have shaped second-language (L2) composition while at the same time influencing students' perceptions of themselves as learners and writers. What does it mean to acquire language? Language seems more than the standard definition of "a system that consists of sounds combined to form sentences that combine to form discourse." To be effective language users, learners must acquire an understanding of culture and pragmatics, the knowledge of how to use language to get things done in the world. Acquiring academic language proficiency is an even greater challenge. Studies have repeatedly shown that it takes five to seven years for ESL students to acquire the academic language proficiency of a typical native-speaker (Collier). Shaughnessy's legacy encompasses some of these changing views of language acquisition. Her proposal to look at student writing problems "in a way that does not ignore the linguistic sophistication of the students nor yet underestimate the complexity of the task they face as they set about learning to write for college" (13), and her analysis of the logic of students' writing errors, came to influence L1 composition research and later research into L2 composing processes.

During the last thirty years, language policies, many seeking to restrict access to higher education, have raised issues of how ESL is defined—linguistically, educationally, politically, and socially. In turn, these definitions have affected ESL pedagogy. Today introductory composition classes might contain ESL students (including the newly labeled Generation 1.5), basic writers, and students of nonstandard dialects. Underlying these heterogeneous groupings is an assumption that the different language and language learning needs of ESL students are not unique and can be addressed within the context of a broader linguistic diversity. Mainstreaming ESL students thus minimizes the need to address ESL as a distinct curriculum issue. Constant Leung's 2003 study in the United Kingdom, "Integrating School-Aged ESL Learners into the Mainstream Curriculum," asserts that the integration of ESL students into the mainstream is ideologically rather than pedagogically driven and notes that curriculum approaches adopted by policy makers are not always influenced by professional experience or research. It seems reasonable to question if recent decisions in CUNY and, indeed, across the United States to mainstream ESL students are based on sound educational grounds or might

instead be the result of other ideological or political concerns.

In the years ahead, English departments and writing programs will need to explore ways to respond to the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse student populations. CUNY's Open Admissions policy and its subsequent elimination from the senior colleges would indicate that over the past thirty years we have not found or defined Shaughnessy's "territory of tolerable error" (122) and have not reached any consensus as to what college-level writing is and how it can be meaningfully and fairly assessed.

Since the publication of *Errors and Expectations*, a growing body of research has enriched our understanding of student writing processes, but there remains much that it is still unknown about ways of ensuring the success of students who are not proficient in English. While much ESL composition pedagogy has drawn on research in L1, compositionists have not availed themselves of research in second-language acquisition that might have a positive impact on all learners in their classrooms. Silva, Leki, and Carson point out that unlike writing classrooms for monolingual speakers, second-language writing classrooms assume that "writers are heterogeneous. . . . they are all developmental in that their tackling of academic writing will be a new experience; they will achieve differing ultimate success in their second language; they bring to the classroom specific culturally determined educational, social, and linguistic characteristics to which they claim an undisputed right and to which academic English is merely one addition" (424). Yet teachers of heterogeneous composition classes may have little knowledge of second-language perspectives. If mainstreaming is to succeed, if college is to *beckon* more than it *threatens*, then educators must enter our classrooms better versed in studies of language and culture and the interplay of linguistics and composition.

In addition, the success of all writers might be further enhanced by classroom pedagogies that acknowledge and build on the reciprocity between reading and writing. While many college writing assignments draw on readings, not enough attention has been paid to the difficulties students have in accessing and making sense of these works. Both first- and second-language writers would benefit from receiving instruction in reading across a variety of texts and genres and in classes throughout the curriculum.

In 1977, Mina Shaughnessy gave eloquent expression to our need to reexamine how we teach and how we view the capabilities of the untraditional college students then entering CUNY's campuses. Her advice to "grant students the intelligence and will they need to master what is being taught" (292), and to consider our own mistakes and inadequacies in the teaching

process is no less relevant today. Our abilities as teachers and as scholars to address the needs of today's multilingual, multicultural students will surely define the University in the decades to come.

### **Works Cited**

- Collier, Virginia P. "Acquiring a Second Language for School." *Directions in Language and Education* 1.4 (1995).
- Courage, Richard. "The Interaction of Public and Private Literacies." *College Composition and Communication* 44.4 (1993): 484-96.
- Leung, Constant. "Integrating School-Aged ESL Learners into the Mainstream Curriculum." *The International Handbook of English Language Teaching*. Ed. Jim Cummins and Chris Davison. New York: Springer. 2007. 237-69.
- Shaughnessy, Mina P. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Silva, Tony, Ilona Leki, and Joan Carson. "Broadening the Perspective of Mainstream Composition Studies: Some Thoughts from the Disciplinary Margins." *Written Communication*, 14.3 (1997): 398-428.

## Mary Soliday

*"We reject in our bones the traditional meritocratic model of a college."*  
—Mina Shaughnessy, "The Miserable Truth" (269)

Since 1979, Mina Shaughnessy's critics have argued that she urged students to assimilate to correct school forms rather than investigating the possible cultural changes students would experience as a result of this assimilation. It has also been suggested that Shaughnessy's views reflected the basic assumptions of CUNY's original Open Admissions policy: the students had to change and not the university (e.g., Rouse; Gunner; Horner and Lu).

Shaughnessy's critics often view language through the lens of *identity politics*, a perspective dominant in the academy in the 1990s and still influential in composition studies today. In this framework, writers express their identity primarily through their cultural heritage and especially through language. A CUNY student who brings with her to college a nontraditional dialect or second language is likely to experience a cultural clash between the identity associated with her "home" language and that of the socially and linguistically more powerful academy.

In *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy acknowledged the role this cultural struggle played for basic writers (292), but she did not develop a curriculum based on struggle because she viewed language through the lens of *access politics*. Shaughnessy was concerned with making sure nontraditional students had direct access to traditional education. She was less interested in reforming the traditional curriculum, partly because she thought curriculum would change once nontraditional students were aggressively integrated into the academy. At City College, she hoped to institutionalize access by establishing a direct avenue between remedial and liberal arts courses and by professionalizing the new field of basic writing.

Though not without its practical dimensions, Open Admissions in 1970 was in many ways a radical response to the enduring problem of social inequality. Labor historian Joshua Freeman argues, for instance, that open access to CUNY was accomplished by a municipal coalition that pushed for greater privileges for working- and middle-class people in terms of wages,

---

*Professor of English at the City College of New York, Mary Soliday is the author of The Politics of Remediation (U of Pittsburgh P, 2002), which received the CCCC Outstanding Book Award for 2004. She has recently completed Everyday Genres: Readers and Writers Make Assignments Across the Curriculum.*

housing, and education. Momentarily, he concludes, the coalition crossed lines of race, class, and gender to demand that CUNY de-stratify its institutions and enable students to move freely between colleges in the system. For a brief moment, CUNY really did challenge the traditional model of college, and I don't think the challenge has been repeated. On the contrary, since the 1990s, CUNY (and public higher education more generally) has re-stratified itself by abolishing remediation in four-year schools and creating a rising junior exam, an honors college, and stiffer entrance requirements in English and mathematics.

Meanwhile, in our profession, we tend to represent our students as members of singular cultural groups distinguished by ethnic, linguistic, or religious differences. I worry that the broader language of solidarity, democracy, and challenge that was typical of Shaughnessy and many of her CUNY colleagues has vanished from the scene. I worry too that basic writing programs are losing visibility in four-year institutions and thus in our mainstream professional discourse. Do we still desire *in our bones* to challenge the traditional model of college? Or, does this challenge now belong to its historical moment?

### Works Cited

- Freeman, Joshua. *Working-Class New York*. New York: The New Press, 2000.
- Gunner, Jeanne. "Iconic Discourse: The Troubling Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy." *Journal of Basic Writing* 17 (1998): 25-42.
- Horner, Bruce, and Min-Zhan Lu. *Representing the "Other": Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1999.
- Maher, Jane. *Mina P. Shaughnessy*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997.
- Rouse, John. "The Politics of Composition." *College English* 41 (1979): 1-12.
- Shaughnessy, Mina P. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Miserable Truth." Maher 263-69.

**Jessica Yood**

*“But there is another sense in which the students we have been describing ought not to be viewed as transitional—as students, that is, whom colleges must sustain in a kind of holding action until the lower schools begin doing their jobs. They are, in some respects, a group from whom we have already learned much and from whom we can learn much more in the years ahead.”*

—Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (291, emphasis added)

*“Someone who cares has to ask that question before the revolution can start. . . . In the teaching of composition, the essential person who asked that question may not have been a man, but a woman, Mina Shaughnessy. . . . Her example, her book, and her repeated calls for new research in composition have undoubtedly been important stimuli in spurring the profession’s search for a new paradigm.”*

—Maxine Hairston, “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing” (120, 121)

Reading these two pioneers of the profession together forces us to consider the more well-known contribution of Shaughnessy alongside another kind of legacy: her radical critique of the aspirations of academia in general and the purpose of our profession in particular.

In her well-known 1982 article, “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing,” Maxine Hairston predicted, with much fanfare and dramatic prose, the birth of a new academic field—the modern discipline of Composition and Rhetoric. According to Hairston, it was *Errors and Expectations* that blew in these winds of change. The field, she claimed, was only poised towards disciplinarity, in a kind of purgatory (she called it the “transition phase”) awaiting the revolution. In this piece, Hairston named Shaughnessy’s “example, her book, her calls for research” as the “important stimuli” to move Composition from a “transitional phase” (120) of a paradigm shift into permanent disciplinary status.

---

*Six stops on the Number 4 train from Yankee Stadium and around the corner from J-Lo’s birthplace lies CUNY’s Lehman College, a 37-acre tree-lined campus and the only four-year public college in this poorest of New York City’s boroughs. On this patch of green in the Bronx come students from 90 countries—with more than half speaking English as a second language or dialect. **Jessica Yood** teaches at Lehman College.*

Lofty aspirations, indeed. And it's rather exciting to think about our work this way—geared toward greatness, ready for revolution, positioned to become, any day now, a profession with a paradigm. Shaughnessy's work would be that catalyst for radical change.

But with each of these promises we move a little farther away from Shaughnessy's premise about what we can find out from the less lofty goings on of basic writers in basic classrooms. She didn't want to transition to anywhere past the place where "errors and expectations" began: in her classroom. And so measuring that book—and everything associated with it—to the dimensions of paradigm is like trying to fit a round peg in a square hole. Or trying to put Yankee Stadium in Manhattan. It just doesn't fit.

This university—the City University of New York—and our profession—the teaching of writing, the scholarship of Composition and Rhetoric—have been through a great deal since the groundbreaking, discipline-defining work of Maxine Hairston, and Mina Shaughnessy. We've had, and have, process and post-process and cultural studies and WAC and WID and basic writing and general education and service learning and so on. But taken together, with all of the good work these programs represent, I wonder: Where is *the* big idea? *The* paradigm?

I don't see one. Our initiatives are a little revolutionary *and* a little reactionary *and*, often, transitional. But not paradigmatic. The work of basic writing won't mesh with powerful paradigmatic promises. For every new program or new pedagogy we create, another is torn down, along with the politics and policies that often accompanied it. Many of us at CUNY, and elsewhere, came to Composition and basic writing because research wasn't enough. We wanted to search for—and find—meaning in teaching and being with students and their emerging ideas. We still want our work to last longer than an election cycle or a budget crisis.

And yet. Not transitional, not paradigmatic, our work today feels much like Shaughnessy described it thirty years ago: a rough draft we're still revising. We're not *there* yet, because our students and our teaching situations are constantly shifting. At times, this can feel unsettling. But for Shaughnessy, it wasn't. There was, she told us, great potential in constant motion. Paradigms declare and maintain. Composition continues to push farther, to suggest. This is, for me, the heart of *Errors and Expectations*. It argued that academia should be an opening: letting untraditional students *in* to the academy and letting willing and brave teachers and scholars *out* of the sometimes stifling confines of its abstractions and disciplinary demarcations.

This, too, is a lofty aspiration, of another sort. But is it enough? Should



we stop searching for that collective vision, the big idea, the paradigm of this generation's discipline? Might we, like Shaughnessy, find epistemological revolution elsewhere, rooted not in paradigms, but in persons, places, policies—in those areas of academia where the winds of change blow closer to the ground?

### **Works Cited**

- Hairston, Maxine. "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing." *Landmark Essays on Writing Process*. Ed. Sondra Perl. Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1994. 113-26.
- Shaughnessy, Mina P. *Errors and Expectations*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

Photo Credit: Alberto Vargas